

The President's News Conference With President Nicolas Sarkozy of France
March 30, 2010

President Obama. Please, everybody, have a seat. Good afternoon. *Bienvenue.*

I am delighted to welcome my dear friend President Sarkozy to the White House. And I also want to welcome to the United States the First Lady of France, and Michelle and I are very much looking forward to hosting our guests at dinner this evening.

Now, I have to point out that the French are properly famous for their cuisine, and so the fact that Nicolas went to Ben's Chili Bowl for lunch—[*laughter*—I think knows—shows his discriminating palate. My understanding is he had a half-smoke, so he was sampling the local wares. And we appreciate that very much.

This visit is an opportunity to return the hospitality that the President and the French people have shown to me during my visits to France. And that includes our family's wonderful visit to Paris last summer. Michelle and I will never forget the opportunity to introduce our daughters for the first time to the City of Lights. And I don't think that Sasha will ever forget celebrating her eighth birthday at the Elysee Palace with the President of France. That's a pretty fancy way for an 8-year-old to spend their birthday.

Today President Sarkozy and I have reaffirmed the enduring ties between our countries. France is our oldest ally and one of our closest. We are two great republics bound by common ideals that have stood together for more than two centuries, from Yorktown to Normandy to Afghanistan.

Under President Sarkozy's leadership, France has further secured its rightful place as a leader in Europe and around the world, recognizing that meeting global challenges requires global partnerships. France took the historic step of returning to NATO's military command, and we are working to revitalize our transatlantic bonds, including a strong, capable European Union, which the United States firmly supports, because a close transatlantic partnership is critical to progress, whether it's applying our combined strength to promote development and confront violent extremism in Africa, or reconstruction in Haiti, or advancing peace from the Caucasus to the Middle East.

Mr. President, on behalf of the American people, I also want to thank you for your personal efforts to strengthen the partnership between our countries. Now, we first met 4 years ago. I was a Senator then; Nicolas was still running for President at the time. And I immediately came to admire your legendary energy and your enthusiasm for what our countries can achieve together. And that was the spirit of your eloquent speech to Congress 3 years ago, which deeply moved many Americans.

Over the past year, the President and I have worked closely on numerous occasions. We respect one another and understand one another, and we share a belief that through bold yet pragmatic action, our generation can bend the arc of history towards justice and towards progress. And this shared commitment to solving problems allowed us to advance our common interests today.

We agreed to continue working aggressively to sustain the global economic recovery and create jobs for our people. And this includes—as we agreed with our G-20 partners at

Pittsburgh—to replacing the old cycle of bubble and bust with growth that is balanced and sustained. And this requires effective coordination by all nations. Now, to that end, I updated the President on our efforts to pass financial reform, and I look forward to the Senate taking action on this landmark legislation so we never repeat the mistakes that led to this crisis.

We must provide sufficient oversight so that reckless speculation or reckless risk-taking by a big—a few big players in the financial markets will never again threaten the global economy or burden taxpayers. And we must assure that consumers of financial products have the information and safeguards that they need so that their life savings are not placed in needless jeopardy. And that's why I press for the passage of these reforms through Congress when they return, and I will continue to work with President Sarkozy and other world leaders to coordinate our efforts, because we want to make sure that whatever steps we're taking, they are occurring on both sides of the Atlantic.

We agreed that sustained and balanced growth includes rejecting protectionism. France is one of our largest trading partners. And we need to expand global commerce, not constrain it. With that regard, we think it's important that Doha trade negotiations move forward this year, and we need all interested parties to push for a more ambitious and balanced agreement that opens global markets. And we look forward to France's Presidency of both the G-8 and G-20 next year. So Nicolas is going to be very busy.

To address climate change, we agreed that all nations aligned with the Copenhagen accord must meet their responsibilities. And I would note that President Sarkozy's leadership has resulted in significant new resources to address deforestation around the world. Upcoming meetings at the United Nations and the Major Economies Forum will be an opportunity of—for nations to follow up their Copenhagen commitments with specific and concrete actions that reduce emissions.

We reaffirmed our commitment to confront the greatest threat to global security: the spread of nuclear weapons. And I updated President Sarkozy on our new START Treaty with Russia. I look forward to welcoming President Sarkozy back to Washington in 2 weeks for our summit on securing vulnerable nuclear materials so that they never fall into the hands of terrorists.

We discussed our shared determination to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. On this, the United States and France are united, are inseparable. With our P5-plus-1 partners, we offer Iran good faith proposals to resolve this matter through diplomacy. But Iran thus far has rejected those offers. Today, the international community is more united than ever on the need for Iran to uphold its obligations. And that's why we're pursuing strong sanctions through the U.N. Security Council.

And finally, we discussed our efforts to advance security and peace around the world, including in the Middle East, where we agree that all sides need to act now to create the atmosphere that gives the proximity talks the best chance to succeed.

I shared my impressions from my discussions with President Karzai on the urgent need for good government and development in Afghanistan. As I told our troops, we salute our coalition partners, and that includes France, which is one of the largest contributors to the NATO mission, and which has given its most precious resource, the lives of its young men and women, to a mission that is vital to the security of both our countries' and the world's security.

So I thank President Sarkozy for his visit and for the progress that our countries have made today, in large part because of his extraordinary leadership. We are global partners facing

global challenges together, and I think that Nicolas will agree that when it comes to America's oldest ally, we've never been closer.

So I'll simply close with words that one American leader expressed to another French partner more than 200 years ago, because Washington's words to Rochambeau reflect the bonds between our countries today: We are "fellow laborers in the cause of liberty, and we have lived together as brothers should do, in harmonious friendship." In that spirit, I welcome President Nicolas Sarkozy.

President Sarkozy. Thank you, Mr. President. Thank you for your invitation. I think that we can say—I stand to be corrected by Bernard Kouchner and Christine Lagarde—but I think we can say that rarely in the history of our two countries has the community of views been so identical between the United States of America and France.

To wit: one example, which is that France would not be stepping next year into the Presidency of the G-20 had the United States of America not supported France for this Presidency. Now, there are the words, there are the statements, and then there are the facts, the acts, and that is a fact.

Now, I will not repeat what the—what President Obama so eloquently said. On Afghanistan, we support President Obama's strategy. We cannot afford to lose—not for us, not for ourselves, but for Afghanistan and for the people of Afghanistan, who are entitled to live in freedom. Of course the road is arduous. Of course nothing is—can be anticipated. And of course we are so sorrowful for the loss of young lives. But we have to have the courage to go to the end of our strategy and explain that there is no alternative strategy. Defeat would be too high a price for the security of Americans, the French, and Europeans. By fighting in Afghanistan, what we are fighting for is the—is world security, quite simply.

Now, on Iran, I am very satisfied with what President Obama has said. The time has come to take decisions. Iran cannot continue its mad race. Now, we don't want to punish Iran, which deserves better than what it has by way of leadership today, and therefore, our—fully support in order to get stronger, tougher sanctions at the Security Council and take the necessary decisions is what you have. I have said to President Obama that with Angela Merkel and Gordon Brown, we will make all necessary efforts to ensure that Europe as a whole engages in the sanction regime.

On the Middle East, it's excellent news to hear that the United States are thus engaged. And of course peace in the Middle East is the—is something which concerns primarily the Israelis and the Palestinians. However, the absence of peace in the Middle East is a problem for all of us, because what it does is keep feeding terrorism all over the world. And I wish to express my solidarity vis-a-vis President Obama in condemning the settlement process. Everybody knows how engaged and committed I am vis-a-vis Israel's security, but the settlement process achieves nothing, and it contributes in no way to Israel's safety and security. There comes a time when you have to take initiatives in favor of peace.

Now, on financial regulation, again, it's great news for the world to hear that the United States is availing itself of rules, adopting rules so that we not go back to what we have already experienced. And then, during the French Presidency of the G-20, Tim Geithner, Christine Lagarde are going to be working hand in glove in order to go even further in regulating world capitalism, and in particular, raising the issue of a new world international monetary order.

Now, on all these subjects, there's much convergence of views. And of course I want to say to President Obama how glad we were for him and for the U.S.A. to hear of the successful passing of the health care reform.

And insofar as the President has revealed a secret, namely, where I had lunch today, I should say that I have a good friend in Washington who had actually recommended that restaurant. When I walked in, I saw a huge photograph of President Obama. And I'm afraid that when you go back to that restaurant, you may see a smaller photograph of the French President. *[Laughter]*

President Obama. Excellent. Thank you.

All right, we've got time for a couple of questions. I'm going to call on Ben Feller. There you are, Ben—AP *[Associated Press]*.

Iran/France-U.S. Relations

Q. Thank you, sir. Thank you for your patience. President Obama, you've talked about the importance of having consequences for Iran over its nuclear program, but is there ever a real deadline? What is your specific timeline for U.N. sanctions on Iran? And is it one that the American people can believe in?

President Obama. Well——

Q. And—I'm sorry, sir. I just wanted to ask——

President Obama. Sure.

Q. President Sarkozy, you said yesterday in New York that the world needs an open America, an America that listens. I'm wondering if you can elaborate—specifically, if you think President Obama is open to the world and is listening to you.

President Obama. Well, let me answer the second question, even though that was to Nicolas. *[Laughter]* I listen to Nicolas all the time. I can't stop listening to him. *[Laughter]*

On Iran, we came in with a very clear approach and a very clear strategy, and it was an open book to the world. We said we would engage Iran and give them an opportunity to take the right path, a path that would lead to prosperity and opportunity for their people and a peaceful region, and one in which they would allow themselves to become a full-fledged member of the community of nations. The alternative path was further isolation and further consequences.

We mobilized the international community around this approach, including partners like Russia that in the past might have been more hesitant to take a firmer stance on Iran's nuclear program. What we said, though, was that there was going to be a time limit to it and that if we had not seen progress by the end of the year, it was time for us to move forwards on that sanctions track.

My hope is that we are going to get this done this spring. So I'm not interested in waiting months for a sanctions regime to be in place; I'm interested in seeing that regime in place in weeks. And we are working diligently with our international partners, emphasizing to them that, as Nicolas said, this is not simply an issue of trying to isolate Iran; it has enormous implications for the safety and the security of the entire region. We don't want to see a nuclear arms race in the Middle East.

A conflict in the Middle East as a consequence of Iran's actions could have a huge destabilizing effect in terms of the world economy at a time when it's just coming out of a very deep recession.

The long-term consequences of a nuclear-armed Iran are unacceptable. And so Nicolas, myself, and others agree that we have engaged; the door remains open if the Iranians choose to walk through it. But they understand very clearly what the terms of a diplomatic solution would be. And in the interim, we are going to move forcefully on a U.N. sanctions regime.

Now, do we have unanimity in the international community? Not yet. And that's something that we have to work on. We think that we are in a much stronger position to get robust sanctions now than we were a year ago, prior to us initiating our strategy.

But it's still difficult, partly because, let's be honest, Iran is a oil producer, and there are a lot of countries around the world that, regardless of Iran's offenses, are thinking that their commercial interests are more important to them than these long-term geopolitical interests. And so we have to continue to apply pressure not just on Iran, but we have to make sure that we are communicating very clearly that this is very important to the United States.

Q. You can get unanimity within weeks?

President Obama. We think that we can get sanctions within weeks.

President Sarkozy. Well, I've read many comments—and I must say I've been quite amused—on the relations between European leaders and the President of the United States. I say I'm amused because I've thought to myself, well, when we speak to one another, people must be listening to our phone calls, because I have seen reports on conversations and discussions which in no way resemble anything that has ever taken place between Barack Obama and myself.

Now, why is it easy for us to work? And I speak on behalf of Chancellor Merkel, Gordon Brown, and other leaders. Well, because President Obama, when he says something, keeps his word. His word is his bond. And that is so important. There's a joke among us: We don't like surprises. Well, from that point of view, there's no surprises. When he can, he delivers; when he can't, he says so. So there are no surprises. And we try to be likewise.

Furthermore, secondly, on all topics—and there have been some pretty tough topics. I mean, for instance, bonus—taxes on bonuses, regulation, financial regulations—pretty heavy-going stuff—Copenhagen. I mean, I happen to think that President Obama is a step ahead of public opinion in the United States on this. But we're constantly talking about it. It's even President Obama who wanted us to have a call conference, a videoconference virtually every month with Angela Merkel and Gordon Brown.

Now, this doesn't merely mean that we absolutely agree neck and neck on everything, but we talk amongst ourselves. And this is a novelty from the point of view of Europe, whenever we look at the United States, that everything is put on the table, anything can be discussed, everything can be discussed.

What matters, you see, is not whether we agree once systematically before we've even started discussing thing—that's suspicious. It's to say, whatever divergence of views we may have, we can talk about it among ourselves. And I say things very frankly to you, and this is what all we European leaders believe and think.

I've also heard it said that Europe was less interested in the United States. Well, for heaven's sake, how many times do we have to come over to show that we are interested? What would it mean if we were interested?

So, very frankly and very honestly on this, not only is it not an issue, not a problem, but it's great to be able to work under such conditions. I would say that what I have to say about President Obama is the same as what Bernard Kouchner could say about Hillary Clinton or Christine Lagarde about Tim Geithner—that we're constantly having a dialog.

I could even take you—give you an example of something on which we don't necessarily agree, such as Syria—or we didn't agree. France took an initiative, as you know. Well, I'll say this to you. At no point—no point has President Obama turned his back on what we were doing. Constantly, he's watching; he's listening. We're constantly exchanging information on the subject, even when there are more complex topics, including in our relations with the Russians. Before even we inform our Russian—or the Russians or our partners, I pick up the phone, I call President Obama, and he knows exactly what we're going to do and why we're going to do it. You follow me on that?

So there may be disagreements, but never for the wrong reasons. And as we are very transparent on both sides, there's confidence, there's trust. And I really think I can say that. There's a lot of trust.

Now, trust always helps one overcome, perhaps, diverging interests. It may be that the United States of America has slightly different interests of those of France, but the bedrock of trust between us is something that he also has with all European leaders. And I don't say this to please you; I said it because it's true. And I took two examples of two topics that could, in other tide—other times, have led to head-on collision, and which in this case, on the contrary, are looked at on both sides of the Atlantic as a situation where we are complementary.

Perhaps he said, well, maybe on Syria, France is on the right track, and maybe one day we'll have the opportunity to do likewise. And that's exactly the way we work.

Go ahead, I'm not the one with the mike.

U.S. Defense Department Procurements

[At this point, a reporter asked a question in French, which was translated as follows.]

Q. Since you've just talked about the United—the relations with Europe and the United States, didn't you get a bad surprise, a nasty surprise, on the Pentagon's decision on the tanker planes, which reversed the decision which had originally been taken in favor of Airbus? Did you raise this subject with President Obama? And if so, did you try and put together a new approach, so as to ensure that the competition would be fairer?

[The reporter then continued in English.]

Q. Mr. President, what do you think about this new version of this contract with the Pentagon, and don't you think that it would be probably fair to share this contract with the Europeans, since they are now full members of NATO and that they share the price of the war on the ground?

President Sarkozy. If I said I hadn't raised it, it would mean that what I've just told you would be meaningless and senseless. Of course we've talked about it, and President Obama will give you his answer. But I said to him, I trust you. And I do trust him. If you say to me that the

request for proposals, the call for tenders will be free, fair, and transparent, then we say, EADS will bid, and we trust you.

President Obama. And what I said to President Sarkozy is, is that the process will be free and fair and that the trust is justified.

Now, it's important for my European friends to understand that, at least here, the Secretary of Defense makes procurement decisions. The President does not meddle in these decisions. And that's a longstanding policy. So I maintain an arm's length approach, but I have assurances from Secretary of Defense Gates that, in fact, the rebidding process is going to be completely transparent, completely open, and a fair competition. That's in our interests. It's in the interest of American taxpayers, and it's also in the interest of our young men and women who rely on this equipment in order to protect this Nation.

And it's important to note, I think, for those of you who don't know Secretary Gates, this is somebody who has actually taken on the military and weapons systems establishment and initiated some very significant procurement reforms that nobody ever thought would happen here in Washington. So he's somebody who's willing to call it like it is and make difficult decisions, and he will do so in this situation as well.

Okay? Thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President's news conference began at 4:56 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, the President referred to Carla Bruni-Sarkozy, wife of President Sarkozy; and President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan. President Sarkozy referred to Minister of Foreign and European Affairs Bernard Kouchner and Minister of Economy, Industry, and Employment Christine Lagarde of France; Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany; and Prime Minister Gordon Brown of the United Kingdom. President Sarkozy and a reporter spoke in French, and their remarks were translated by an interpreter.

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Financial regulations, modernization efforts; Economy, national : Recession, effects; Employment and unemployment : Job creation and growth; Environment : Climate change; Environment : Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate; Environment : United Nations Climate Change Conference; Europe : European Union :: Relations with U.S.; France : Afghanistan :: French military forces, casualties; France : Afghanistan :: French military forces, deployment; France : North Atlantic Treaty Organization, military command participation; France : President; France : Relations with U.S.; Haiti : Earthquake, damage and recovery efforts; Iran : Diplomatic relations with U.S.; Iran : International diplomatic efforts; Iran : Nuclear weapons development; Iran : U.N. Security Council sanctions; Middle East : Peace and democracy efforts; North Atlantic Treaty Organization; Russia : Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) with U.S., proposed expansion.

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